

Fr. John's Homily for October 1, 2023: 26th Sunday in Ordinary Time

JMJ CHS

The message of today's Gospel is similar to last week's. We are in the midst of a string of parables about the Kingdom of Heaven which convey important info to the people about what Heaven would be like.

Now today's parable was actually directed at the chief priests and elders. It is the short and simple story of the two brothers and their individual responses to their father's instructions. And again, it's the late-comer, the prodigal son, the one who said NO in the beginning but later changes his mind and repents. The other brother, deemed righteous in the beginning, failed in the end. No, although this doesn't have anything to do with the point Jesus was trying to make, we might ask ourselves the question, "*What went wrong?*" Was he just disobedient or deceitful? Or was he distracted and just forgot? All of the above? Or none of the above?

In any case, the religious leaders – the Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes and scholars, priests and pastors of the flock – again, had better be careful because tax collectors and prostitutes could end up in heaven before them.

But just like last week's parable about the vineyard workers, doesn't it all sound at least a bit unfair? Well, from my perspective as a priest, yes. After years of faithful service as a priest if I should stumble at the end, could I lose it all? Yes, it does sound unfair to me. But our first reading from Ezekiel seems to address the question. God says to the Israelites, "*You may say I'm unfair, but..... is it my ways that are unfair, or is it your ways?*" I guess we know the answer to that one. And I had better be thankful for the gift of confession and the gift of purgatory.

So, we priests of the Diocese of Lansing were on convocation this past week. There were two guest speakers and then, of course, there were the three Masses with their readings which are always instructional and inspirational.

The theme of the Convocation was *Healthy Boundaries* and it focused on the personal behaviors of us religious leaders – your priests and pastors. One of our guest speakers was a layman and the other one was a priest. The layman was a psychologist, counselor and therapist for priests who get themselves into trouble. The other speaker was a priest from the Diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska. He was very well received, candid and transparent as he shared his story of how he had indeed gotten himself into trouble many times throughout his life. But, don't be too quick to judge, because so much of what he has endured in his life was not his fault. I think he was truly a victim of circumstances.

You have heard me say many times that God frequently chooses unlikely candidates to do His work. A perfect example would be the 12 Apostles. Among them would be a betrayer, a denier, a zealot and a tax collector. And if you watch *The Chosen*, you can see how their lives could have been molded by 'circumstances' in their lives. They have suffered in many different ways. Mary Magdalen, in the very first episode, was a good example. A very wounded soul combined with some poor choices caused her to be possessed by seven demons. But liberated by Jesus, she becomes a model disciple. Then in a later episode, she backslid. But she went to confession, that is, she repented, was restored and is now declared a saint. In fact, she is now called *the Apostle to the Apostles*.

And there are of course, many examples from Catholic history of great sinners who became saints. One of the first was St. Paul himself. A persecutor of Christians who became one of us.

But God uses the sufferings of the saints for our benefit. We hear their stories and we can relate because we are given hope that we, too, can overcome our circumstances.

After his conversion, St. Paul went on to instruct various communities through his letters. Today's letter to the Philippians is still read by us many years later and serves as a guidebook on how we are to conduct ourselves in the here-and-now.

Once *the scales fall from our eyes and* we can see clearly, we are enlightened, we come to our senses, repent and are converted. Then we are prepared to move on to be a new person in Christ, making a difference in the world by our words and deeds. And Paul gives us some examples of what that means when he spoke to the people of Philippi. He urged them to be of the same mind. God wants unity in his church. Don't be selfish or vain. Practice humility. Regard others as more important than yourself. Be of service to each other and strive to have the same attitude that Christ had in His love of His church.

Last Sunday was Priesthood Sunday and I thought its proximity to our convocation was kind of interesting. The timing was impeccable and I think I could confidently say that we came out of that time more bonded together and more unified as a *band of brothers*.

At our Masses, we celebrated the memory of several saints; Cosmas and Damien, St. Vincent de Paul and on Thursday, just before leaving, we had a healing Mass. We priests typically do the anointing but this time bishop Earl anointed us. Many of the brothers are indeed "*the walking wounded*", suffering from a host of physical ailments. And that evening we also celebrated the Sacrament of Confession which was an opportunity for spiritual healing.

The priest presenter, Fr. Sean Kilcawley, is actually from our neighborhood – Pinckney and Whitmore Lake. His dad once belonged to our parish and some of you knew young Sean before he entered the seminary.

Now I am sure you have heard some people say about their lives, "*I could write a book*" and it seems Fr. Sean could write several books about his life. He was very candid and transparent in sharing the ups and downs he has endured along the way. But as God can take our sufferings and transform them, Sean suffered that much so that he might be a consolation to the rest of us. And yes, you, too, can learn from him. He's on *YouTube*.

He shared his journey so that we might learn from it and be coached on how we might overcome the traumas in our own lives – traumas that maybe even lead to sinful behaviors like addictions to pornography.

Next weekend is designated as a *Safe Haven Sunday*. This is a new initiative in which we will talk about the terrible effects pornography has had in our generation. But Fr. Sean says that whenever he talks about this to groups of people, he never actually uses the word pornography. His reasoning is that it is only one of many different types of addictions that afflict human beings these days. In many cases, we are like innocent bystanders because those shocks to our systems were in a sense imposed on us in our younger days.

We will certainly speak more about it next week as we continue on with those parables preached by Jesus by Jesus. Universal stories for every generation, in every time and place, to tell us what the kingdom of God is like.

~Fr. John